

F- Wbox

Seminar on
PERSPECTIVES ON INDIA'S DEVELOPMENT IN THE 1990s

Participatory rural appraisal, and whose reality counts?
- A summary

Robert Chambers

New Delhi, January 28-29, 1992

Dr. Robert Chambers

Summary of Remarks for the Symposium:
"Perspectives on India's Development in the 1990s"

Participatory rural appraisal, and whose reality counts?

World-wide, ideas of development are changing rapidly. We are in the middle of a shift of paradigm from emphasis on things, blueprints and measurements to emphasis on people, processes and judgement. Top-down and centre-outwards standardised transfers are being counterbalanced by reversals, by giving primacy to what is local and diverse. "We" (the non-poor, the outsiders) are increasingly recognising ourselves and our definitions of reality as much of the problem and "them" (the poor) and their definitions of reality as much of the solution. The question is more and more now about approaches and methods, about how we can enable and empower poor people better to conduct their own data collection and analysis, to express their own diverse priorities, and to seek their own solutions.

There may be many ways. But one approach or family of methods pioneered in India during the past three years, and known generally as Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), has shown itself to be promising, popular and powerful. Its spread from India to other countries reinforces the impression that it is indeed a significant methodological breakthrough. There has been a burst of creativity on the part of both outsiders and villagers, in inventing participatory approaches and methods for learning, planning and implementation. This has happened fast. Besides villagers themselves, many of the innovators have been in NGOs including (in alphabetical order) ActionAid (Bangalore), the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (Gujarat), Krishi Gram Vikas Kendra (Ranchi), MYRADA (Bangalore), and SPEECH (Madurai), and others have been in Government, including the LBS National Academy of Administration, the Government of Andhra Pradesh, and the Karnataka Drylands Development Board.

PRA has three pillars: changes in "our" behaviour and attitudes; new participatory methods; and sharing - of knowledge, of training, of experience.

The major finding has been that when outsiders' attitudes and behaviour are right, and methods appropriate, rural people, whether literate or illiterate, show a greater ability than expected to map, model, rank, score, estimate, diagram, observe, interview others, and plan. The methods include participatory mapping and modelling, transects, wealth and wellbeing ranking, matrix scoring, seasonal diagramming, Venn (or chapati) diagramming, and causal diagramming. In combinations and sequences, these have been used in many domains including agricultural research, watershed development, social forestry, credit programmes, health and nutrition, and anti-poverty programmes. The insights and developments associated with PRA now present a range of needs and options. The major need is for outsiders to reorient their behaviour and attitudes towards poor people; and the options are to facilitate the use of the new methods with and by rural people in their own data gathering, analysis, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

Participation, and PRA, run counter to normal forces - of normal reductionist professionalism, of normal transfer of technology, and of

normal standardising and controlling bureaucracy. They challenge outsiders not to impose their reality - blue-printed, standardised and top-down, but instead to encourage and empower rural and poor people to express theirs. PRA is one approach and family of methods with a potential for enabling communities and groups to undertake more of their own analysis and action. It is one way of putting some bite into the often toothless rhetoric of participation.

Associated and in parallel with PRA, there are other promising methodological innovations. One is the lateral transfer of expertise through the village volunteers of the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme in Gujarat. Village volunteers' services are now in demand, and paid for, by people from other villages. Another is the recent self evaluation using PRAs which has been conducted by farmers, the Drylands Development Board, MYRADA and the Swiss Development Corporation in Karnataka, and which has led to the acceptance by Government of farmers' designs for soil conservation works. Yet another is the invention in Andhra Pradesh by a Government officer, K. Chandra Mouli, of a new participatory method ("Pass on the pen") for identifying the poorest in a village (reported in RRA Notes 14). All of these show the potential for new methods, more of which can be expected in the coming months and years.

Questions now for the 1990s concern spread, quality and values. On spread, can participatory behaviour and attitudes, methods, and sharing be extended not just among NGOs but especially in Government? On quality, can spread be accompanied by self-improvement through critical awareness and embracing error? On values, can those who work in large bureaucracies set a positive value on the diversity and loss of control implied by participation and PRA, not just permitting but promoting them?

Experience is being gained rapidly, but the answers cannot be known in advance. At least, though, the questions have become clearer. The challenge they present points to changes in behaviour and attitudes, in methods, and in sharing, as one practical thrust for development in the 1990s.

18 January 1991

Robert Chambers

Sources

The two major sources are the PRA/PALM (Participatory Learning Methods) Series of MYRADA, 2 Service Road, Domlur Layout, Bangalore 580 072, and RRA Notes (especially Number 13 which reports on a Bangalore workshop of February 1991), of the International Institute for Environment and Development, 3 Endsleigh Street, London WC1H 0DD. Both series are available free on request.